

*Cinematic Practices of Repetitions in “The Grudge” and “Ju-On: Origins”*  
–Remaking Networks, Contexts and Building Taxonomy

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**Abstract**

Globalization processes profoundly affected the world economy and, consequently, film industries. Film remakes, among the most well-known forms of creative repetitions, became a norm, especially when approached by Hollywood. The scholarship usually associates remaking with the institutional practices of recycling previously established and financially successful trademarks. However, continuous releases of repeated film titles created complicated and hybrid forms. Various examples of how these forms intersect and even initiate remaking “cycles.” This paper will argue how *The Grudge* (2020), directed by Nicolas Pesce, and the Netflix TV series *Ju-On: Origins* / 呪怨：呪いの家 (2020), directed by Shō Miyake, reflect recent changes in contemporary understanding of film repetitions. Both titles originate from identical source material and are familiar to their target audiences. Simultaneously, they recontextualize the source film, delivering relevant meanings to fit their alleged cultural environment while allowing extensive importations from the source, *Ju-On*-related and other genre titles. This complexity of meanings and references further blurs the boundaries between remake and other types of repetitions, with the latter posing an issue for building sufficient remaking taxonomy. This paper will deliver a formal and critical analysis of the selected motion pictures’ aesthetical forms, contextual content and repetitive nature. The analysis of the case studies enables academic evaluation of the complexity of existing “multiplicities in film” (Klein & Palmer, 2016), “transmedia supersystems” (Kinder, 1991) and distinguishing anthologies from “networks” of film repetitions, research their content adjustments and value as well as the potential of building any context-anchored taxonomy opposed to the existing attempts summarized by the scholars.

Keywords: Film Repetitions, Film Remakes, The Grudge, Ju-On: Origins, Film Networks

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## Introduction

In 1991, Marsha Kinder argued on the nature of “transmedia supersystems of entertainment,” using Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles as an example, pointing to the fluidity of such systems to develop into various mediums (Kinder, 1991). Much later, in an interview with Henry Jenkins (Jenkins, 2015), she returned to her renowned work. Her core arguments about “transmedia supersystems” arise from the accelerating globalism, allowing corporations to expand overseas and further stratification of the information flow through various media, including texts, creative objects, and merchandise. However, despite their dynamism, these arguments have lucid institutional and industrial characteristics. Current media distribution has transnational, transmedia and intermedia qualities, including the reception of the target audience. Consequently, regarding film multiplicities, another term – “network” or “networks of film repetitions” – seems more reliable through its complex dynamism. Its application allows one to point out various released titles, how they interact with one another and affect the reception of the already released material, including the audience’s reaction.

One of the most vivid examples of such “networks” is *Ju-On* and related film titles. Their canonical source material was released by Takashi Shimizu in 2002 under *Ju-On: The Grudge* title. It happened four years after Hideo Nakata’s *Ringu* / リング hit the cinemas. The major Hollywood companies remade both films into *The Ring* (2002) and *The Grudge* (2004) under different modes of production: the former, in terms of Per Linell (Linell, 1998), actively “recontextualized” the source material while a more faithful and formal approach was used in the latter. Nevertheless, even minor adjustments in casting dramatically expanded the contextual depth of the 2004 remake. In this case, in this paper, both Takashi Shimizu’s films *Ju-On: The Grudge* (2002) and *The Grudge* (2004) will be considered the source material.



Figure 1a: The poster of *The Grudge* (2020) displays various aesthetic references to the source film (hair, bathtub) (IMDbPro, 2020).

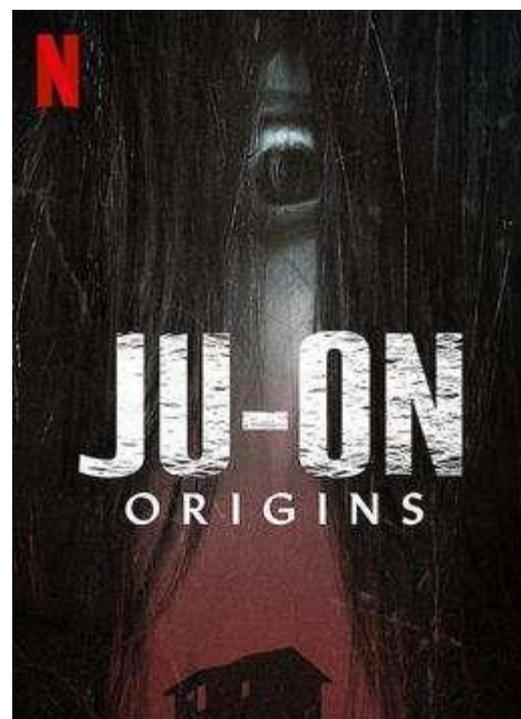


Figure 1b: The poster of *Ju-On: Origins* (2020) featuring the house and antagonist’s gaze (Netflix Media Center, 2020).

Throughout the following years, more titles of *Ju-On* were released in the U.S. and Japan. Then, the interest of the U.S. creative industries in the Japanese-fashioned horror films gradually faded. The focus was shifted to other genres, super-hero movies and remaking of new themes. In Japan, the situation was the opposite: new titles in the form of further sequels, spin-offs and even a video game were released. Some of these titles referred to the aesthetical and semiotic qualities of other popular franchises unrelated to *Ju-On*, like Junji Ito's *Uzumaki* or technophobic implications typical for Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Pulse* or *Kairo* / 回路 [Pulse] (2001) or *Ringu*-related films. Thus, the structure of the "network," being already complicated, was exacerbated by the release of the new titles: the U.S. indie film *The Grudge* (2020) and the Netflix TV series *Ju-On: Origins* (2020) (Fig. 1a and 1b).

The former was an attempt to reimagine previously released U.S. remake and its sequels, adjusting it to new horror genre standards while maintaining its connections with the Japanese source. The latter was instead a prequel TV series reimagining the entire concept of the story and borrowing from the previous instalments of the film network, a subgenre of the Japanese-fashioned horror and elevating the story to the next contextual level.

The sudden appearance of the two new distinct titles based on the same source material almost 20 years after its release raises several questions. First, how do these films fit in the *Ju-On* "mythology," and whether they are part of a film "supersystem" (Kinder, 1991). Second, how these remakes reflect the principle of fidelity to the source material, including contextual adjustments. Finally, the case studies of the titles enable the analysis of the chosen format of film repetition as a remake or any other, arguing for the possibility of drawing context-anchored taxonomy.

Analysis of these questions will allow film scholars and film creators to understand better the phenomenon of cinematic repetitions and practices, their transformation into more complex structures with a hybrid nature and the role of contexts. For that, the paper will deliver a short historical overview of their aesthetic and contextual origins, conduct a visual, textual and contextual analysis of the *Ju-On*-related films and analyze their remaking value through their novelties of the target material and their relevance for their target cultural environments and audiences.

### ***Ju-On*: Conceptual Beginnings**

The origins of *Ju-On* / 呪怨 title and related films are inseparable not only from the director's aesthetics of the first several instalments, Takashi Shimizu, but also Japanese kabuki theatre aesthetics.



Figure 2: An image of *Yotsuya kaidan* showing prominent aesthetical features: pale skin, long hair, white robe, a newborn child, – featured in *The Most Famous Story Of Japanese Horror – Yotsuya Kaidan* (Ganesh, 2020).

The history of the franchise starts with the release in 1998 of two of Shimizu's short films, *Katasumi* / 片隅 [In a Corner] and *4444444444*. Each one depicted vengeful spirits, a lady and a small boy. In Japan, these vengeful spirits are called *onryō* / 怨霊 and are an integral component of *kaidan* / 怪談 [ghost stories]. They were usually portrayed as males or females wearing long white robes, having pale skin contrasting with long black hair with the primary focus on their deformity and gaze (Fig. 2). They originated from the kabuki theatre during the Edo period in Japan and were thriving in the nineteenth century to be later stigmatized as overly grotesque and outdated (Shimazaki, 2016). Nevertheless, intellectuals still reworked famous *kaidan* playwrights, reflecting more background of why the vengeful spirits were wronged. Similar approaches were used in various motion pictures based on *kaidan* narrative and aesthetics with the distinction between female and male *onryō*, with the former taking a dominant role in the genre. One of the more significant transformations with the *onryō* happened in the '90s and '00s when the villain archetype was incorporated into the themes of technophobia and social roles' dynamics in contemporary Japanese society. Takashi Shimizu was one of the artists who recontextualized *onryō* to display to the new audience his vision of the poignant social challenges like domestic violence, housing issues leading to a gradual erosion of *ie* / 家 [family / household], values as persistent and dreadful similar to an unbreakable curse of an entire society.

This vision was already manifested in his 2002 direct-to-video releases of *Ju-On: the Curse* and its sequel. The new motion pictures did not reference the director's previous short works, but the lineage can be traced through him and the producer Takashige Ichise, who would be a producer of various related titles.

In 2002, Shimizu's new creation, *Ju-On: The Grudge*, finally reached theatrical release and soon caught the attention of the Hollywood production companies. The aesthetics of *onryō* were novel and could potentially allure new audiences. A remake was shot in Japan and directed by Shimizu himself. Takashige Ichise remained the producer, sharing the position with Sam Raimi, a prominent U.S. director and the founder of Ghost House Pictures. The box office was favorable to the U.S. remake. However, despite Japanese aesthetics paving their way into the genre canon, the release of the third instalment showed signs of fatigue with the overproduction of Japanese-fashioned horror films. On the contrary, in Japan, new titles were gradually emerging. Even Takashi Shimizu returned to his creation only in 2009 when working on the Nintendo Wii immersive video game.

In 2016, Sam Raimi approached Nicolas Pesce after the release of his indie horror film *Eyes of My Mother* (2016) and made him a proposal to work on a new instalment of *The Grudge* to "reimagine" it for "modern audience" and maintain references to the original film (Feldberg, 2020). In Japan, before 2020, the last title released was a crossover *Sadako vs. Kayako* (2016) directed by another notable horror film director, Koji Shiraishi. One year prior, in 2015, Netflix started its video streaming service in Japan (Hosokawa & Omoto, 2015) as part of the strategic expansion to the Asian markets (Kunz, 2023). The arrival of a global streaming platform provided new opportunities which later were utilized by the long-time *Ju-On* producer Takashige Ichise.

Thus, two new projects were released. Despite their principal differences in the mode of production, release format, approach to the already developed storylines in the form of homage (*Ju-On: Origins*) or direct reference and even quotation (*The Grudge*), they share similar narrative elements, semiotics and aesthetics originated from Shimizu's film:

- The antagonists are vengeful spirits, or *onryō*, based on the archetype and aesthetics borrowed from the Japanese kabuki theatre, further reimaged by the Japanese cinema and incorporated into the subgenre of J-horror.
- Grounding the vessel of the curse to the house in the suburban area.
- Non-linear narrative techniques to reveal additional background details or override temporal connections between the main events of the films.
- The struggle of the particular female characters implying various social issues.

### ***The Grudge: the Hybrid Form of Film Repetition***

Speculations over the new U.S. instalment started circulating in 2011 (Miska, 2011). Only in 2017 did the production turn to its active phase when Nicolas Pesce was granted the director position of the new film (Fleming, 2017). However, the production suffered turmoil when Takashige Ichise filed a lawsuit against Good Universe Pictures for breaching the contractual obligations to include him as a producer of the new title with the subsequent fees paid (Stephens, 2018). The case was settled with Takashige Ichise being cited among other producers. The proceedings affected the film's release, moving its date to 2020 alongside the Netflix title.



Figure 3a. The introduction title of *The Grudge* (2020) in Japanese later transforming into the English one using cross dissolve effect (Pesce, 2020).



Figure 3b. The introduction title of *The Grudge* (2020) in English (Pesce, 2020).



Figure 4: The scene shows the investigation leads to Tokyo with audio commentary by the detective retelling some details of the curse from the source film (Pesce, 2020).

*The Grudge* does not try to conceal its connections to the previous titles and the source material from its very opening. The film introduction was shot in Tokyo and recreated the scene with the cursed house from the remake made in 2004. Part of the introduction reveals the opening film title in Japanese, 呪怨 / Ju-On, which cross-dissolves into the English

translation – *The Grudge* (Fig. 3a and 3b). There are also various solutions within mise-en-scène pointing to the source film, like the investigation board on the wall in the scene when Detective Muldoon listens to the audio tape explaining how the curse in the U.S. was traced to Tokyo (Pesce, 2020, 0:46:46) (Fig. 4). Another reference is visible in the scene when detective Muldoon watches security tape (Pesce, 2020, 0:50:38). The scene refers to the one from the 2004 remake when one of the minor characters notices vengeful spirit Kayako and runs away, and when local detective verifies the content of the tape (Fig. 5a). Similar scene can be traced back from the U.S. remake to the Shimizu’s film (Fig. 5b). Nevertheless, the most striking similarity may be noticed in the shower scene replicating the one from the source material (Fig. 6a and 6b).



Figure 5a: Detective Muldoon checking recording (Pesce, 2020).



Figure 5b: Detectives checking camera recordings and later revealing the antagonist (Shimizu, 2002).



Figure 6a: John Cho's cursed character is haunted by the antagonist in the shower (Pesce, 2020).



Figure 6b: Megumi Okina's character is haunted by the vengeful spirit while in the shower (Shimizu, 2002).

Apart from the *mise-en-scène* recreation, Pesce used reflections to pinpoint the presence of the vengeful spirits. Moreover, the narrative is non-linear – a token of the *Ju-On*-related well-known tradition. Finally, the aesthetics of the antagonists in Pesce's motion picture resemble Japanese *onryō*: long black hair covering the face and skin paleness. Though, similarities are limited to only one antagonist, young Melinda Landers, leading not only to *Ju-On* but rather Takashi Miike's *Chakushin ari* / 着信アリ [One Missed Call] and Hideo Nakata's *Honogurai mizu no soko kara* / 仄暗い水の底から [Dark Water] (2006) with subsequent U.S. remakes or even video game series *F.E.A.R.*

These references to other *Ju-On* titles and J-horror-styled projects were intentional. Furthermore, Pesce claimed that “it was important we didn't erase the Japanese stories, that mythos.” Then, he added that he tried to utilize the curse as something like a virus, a direct homage to Nakata's *Ringu* (Feldberg, 2020). Direct quotation happened in one sequence mimicking the video game *Ju-On: Haunted House Simulator* (2009) (IGN, 2020). Altogether, the narrative, cinematography, various references to the source and other J-horror titles confirmed by the director prove that *The Grudge* is considered as a part of something bigger than just a title of a particular succession. It exists entangled in the canvas of U.S. *Ju-On*

remake, its sequels, Japanese *Ju-On* titles and J-horror films in general. At the same time, the storytelling of *Ju-On* is limited by the 2004 title without any substantial references to its sequels. Aesthetically, the film is connected to its predecessors, while from the storytelling standpoint, it is disconnected from most of the titles. Thus, the 2020<sup>th</sup> U.S. instalment reflects the duality of its approach to the source material. In a broad sense, it treats the whole franchise as its source material, incorporating some details into its story and aesthetics, which allows categorizing it as a part of a “network” of film repetitions.

The 2020 film also connects to the “network” through its contexts. For instance, while approaching Takashi Shimizu’s source film, Valerie Wee identified various implied meanings, including the origins of domestic violence, patriarchic anxieties within the Japanese society related to the degradation of the traditional family institution and, in the case of the U.S. remake, criticism of female adultery and even fear of the Japanese women favoring foreigners to the locals (Wee, 2014).

In Pesce’s film, various Japan-related contexts were omitted, leaving the general theme of domestic violence. Various reasons and details were added to pinpoint the minor and major grievances of the family members being the source. Although, the primary source of each family’s downfall originated from the curse brought from Japan. It implies that apart from the internal family issues, like single motherhood, the U.S. family institution and society are generally vulnerable to external threats – a repeating of the 2004 remake’s contextual semantics.

Pesce characterized his film as a sad family drama pointing to struggles within the family unit (IGN, 2020; JoBlo, 2020), with the curse being their outcome. The overall emphasis on the complications in the family institution is one of the main plotlines of contextual lineages between the source and the target film. Moreover, the remake was released in 2020 not only alongside the Netflix TV series but during the renaissance of the horror film genre, like works of Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017), Ari Aster’s *Hereditary* (2018) and others. It tries to be within the trend of the “elevated” horror releases and erases almost entirely the stories of the 2006 sequel and the 2009 triquel. Consequently, the 2020 film can be labelled a reboot.

On the other hand, it can be categorized as a spin-off. The location is shifted, and the main characters while referring to the 2004 remake as if the events of the sequel and triquel happened simultaneously, though without any direct references except the investigation board (Fig. 4). However, the director and the actress Tara Westwood stated multiple times that they considered the idea behind the film was to create something new rather than copy previous material and to ensure the final result would be something unique and separate from other titles (Bastianello, 2020; Dixon, 2020). Other interviews show evident hesitation to mark *The Grudge* as a remake or even a reboot, the labels usually used by the media outlets. These statements seem understandable, originating from the awareness that the audiences and critics may treat a remake as something inferior to the source material, a common notion in popular media, even towards one artistic medium to another (Thompson, 2003).



Figure 7: One of the first lines in the end credits mentioning the source material (Pesce, 2020).

Thus, categorizing the 2020 film may seem elusive. More ambiguity arises from the existing scholarship taxonomies. If Michael Druxman's or Harvey Roy Greenberg's remake taxonomies were applied (Verevis, 2006; Heinze & Krämer, 2015), Pesce's film should be considered a remake at least because in the end credits Takashi Shimizu's *Ju-On: The Grudge* is cited as a source film (Fig. 7). Using their criteria will be insufficient to define Pesce's film because it incorporates a wide variety of references to multiple titles using source material as a starting point. It also combines various elements from other forms of "film multiplicities" (Klein, 2016). Altogether, Nicolas Pesce's *The Grudge* cannot be categorized as a single form of film repetition. It is rather a hybrid form, incorporating remake, reboot and spin-off features. Additionally, it is unlikely to use contextual qualities as a single criterion when formulating a taxonomy.

### ***Ju-On: Origins: Japanese Society through the Lens of Conventional J-Horror***

*Ju-On: Origins* is a TV series produced by NBC Universal Television, the U.S. company, and W Field, located in Japan. The series was released on the Netflix streaming platform amid the COVID-19 pandemic on July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020. It was not the first collaboration between the production companies. Earlier, they worked together on two *Ju-On* titles: Masayuki Ochiai's *Ju-On: The Beginning of the End / 呪怨: 終わりの始まり* (2014) and *Ju-On: The Final Curse / 呪怨 -ザ・ファイナル-* (2015). Previously mentioned Takashigi Ichise produced both motion pictures.

The script was prepared by Hiroshi Takahashi, the scenario's author for Hideo Nakata's *Ringu*. He offered directing to Shō Miyake despite the protests of the latter being a non-horror film director (Cinema Today, 2020). During the work on the TV series, he relied upon his own experience and style (Tsukinaga, 2020), his feelings about Takashi Shimizu's version of *Ju-On* from 2002 and 2004 (Cinema Today, 2020) and Japanese horror classics in general (Komatsu, 2020).

Changing the medium to the TV series extended its length: the source film of 2002 was 92 minutes long while each episode, on average, was around 25-30 minutes, leaving the TV series' overall length to more than 150 minutes. Fewer time constraints enabled the simultaneous operation of the multiple characters and timelines. The overall story covers the period between 1998 and 1997, which could have been problematic with the traditional

theatrical release. This wider time frame contains minor details of disasters in Japan in the form of news reports: murders, child kidnappings and others. These tiny incidents pile up, transforming into a controversial theme of the entire Japanese society being cursed and the haunted house as one of the pieces of the series of national tragedies.

The extended time frame also allowed to show character development who changed over time, influenced by the curse-related circumstances. For instance, Ririka's character, Kiyomi Kawai, underwent a dramatic transformation after visiting the house. Her character encapsulates various contextual references to Japanese women-related social issues: from bullying and rape to involvement in sex labor and drug addiction. These issues are the focal point of various filmmakers who try to raise attention to the worrying developments which affect the conventional understanding of femininity in Japan. One of them is *ryosai kenbo* (良妻賢母), literally "good wife, wise mother" – an integral social principle in Japan (Wee, 2014). Violation of such a principle is used to justify the curse emergence in film. Alternatively, the insistent utilization of the theme reflects fears of the decline of *ryosai kenbo*, and its transformation into something threatening to the Japanese society. Thus, the tragedy of *Ju-On*'s Kiyomi is not only in her personal, lasting drama, mirroring the tragic incident in the haunted house, but also in her failure to fulfil the expected role of a Japanese woman. Consequently, such failure, together with the minor news reports, is generalized as the collective failure of an entire society.

Other female-related themes include single parenthood, kidnapping of minor girls, domestic violence, adultery and others. They can be traced to another Japanese concept – *ie* (household / family). This concept is a cornerstone of Japanese society and is repeatedly used in films, literature and even political debates (Kuwayama, 2001). Almost all characters' tragedies in the TV series happen with their families in and out of the haunted house. Together with *ryosai kenbo* implications, these incidents are accumulated to reflect the national tragedy of the downfall of the core family concept, which is not just a failure of society but a threat to its existence. The complexity of the applied and implied social meanings is scaled higher than in *The Grudge*.

Similar to Pesce's film, it is unlikely to draw contextually-based taxonomy. Thematically, the TV series uses other *Ju-On* titles but expands them and adds more details by fully utilizing the advantages of the medium. The latter also enables more obscurity of temporal connections between events in a much more vivid fashion than in Shimizu's films. As a vessel of the curse, the house exists outside usual time boundaries, encapsulating all its victims, allowing those who perished to re-appear in different timelines. The source films utilized a more simplified approach, dividing the film into several parts anchored to the specific characters. Thus, contextual meanings between the source and target material as the only criteria are insufficient for drawing concrete taxonomy qualities.



Figure 8a: Kiyomi passes by the mirror in the haunted house in *Ju-On: Origins*, episode 2.

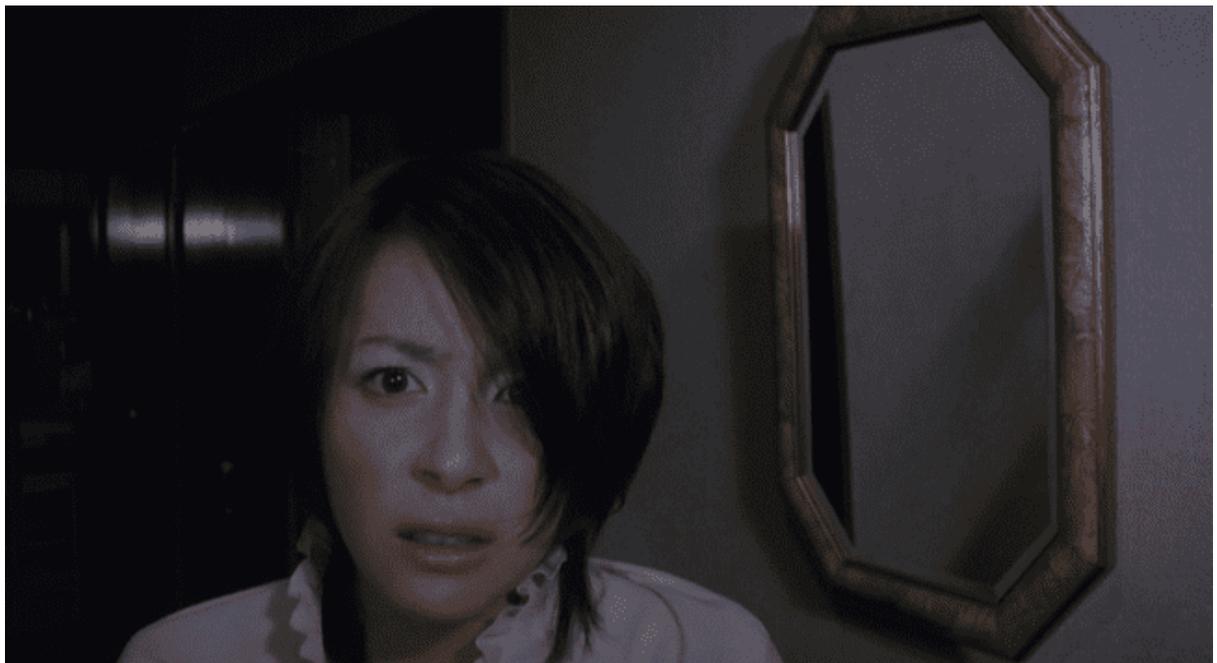


Figure 8b: Mirror played an important role in the ending of *Ju-On: The Grudge* (2002).



Figure 9a: Facial expression of Kai Inowaki's character in *Ju-On: Origins*, episode 2.



Figure 9b: Yuko Takeuchi's character found dead in Hideo Nakata's *Ringu*.



Figure 10a: After the murder, the phone rang, which symbolizing enclosing fate of the character – an indirect to Hideo Nakata's *Ringu*.



- Figure 10b: In Hideo Nakata's *Ringu*, ringing phone was used to point out the start of the countdown before the character perishes – an indirect technophobic narrative element pointing to overdependency on the communications means.

As for the nature of *Ju-On: Origins*, it reuses established themes and cinematography of previous films. For instance, Kayako is not an antagonist, but a similar-fashioned passive spirit is presented. Toshio is replaced by the mysterious Toshiki, and is somehow related to the curse. TV series persistently uses various J-Horror mise-en-scène elements like mirrors (Sakamoto & Yamaguchi, 2020, episode 2, 0:03:30) (Fig. 8a) and mirror-like objects (Shimizu, 2002, 1:23:49) (Fig. 8b), *Ringu*-linked facial expressions of the dead (Sakamoto &

Yamaguchi, 2020, episode 2, 0:15:12; Nakata, 1998, 0:20:24) (Fig. 9a and 9b) and indirect technophobic references (Sakamoto & Yamaguchi, 2020, episode 4, 0:14:57; Nakata, 1998, 0:29:11) (Fig. 10a and 10b). The horror of the TV series is reflected not through the visually unpleasing graphics, special effects or jump scare but through the gradual rise of mystery and the entanglement of narrative connections leading to the haunted house. The slow pace plays the audience's expectations and anxieties, another link between the show, previous titles and J-horror traditions in general.

Mentioning the source film only in the end credits should not be puzzling while identifying the nature of the TV series: both source and target material reflect identical cultural environments and recreate a relatable atmosphere. Numerous references to the previously established through stage design, narrative style, thematic qualities, and story details confirm *Ju-On: Origins* to be part of the *Ju-On* "network" of film repetitions. Moreover, following Rüdiger Heinze and Lucia Krämer, TV series could be called a hybrid term "premake" (Heinze & Kramer, 2015) – a combination of prequel nature and remaking practices.

## Conclusion

As Bliss Cua Lim pointed out while exploring Asian horror films, this genre is relatively cheap and utilizes a universal feeling of fear (Lim, 2009). Nicolas Pesce's *The Grudge* and Shō Miyake's *Ju-On: Origins* Netflix TV series share many similarities. They are not blockbuster projects with limited budgets. Both, released in 2020, are stylistically distinct productions approaching similar source material through different mediums. The directors knew the source before the production (JoBlo Celebrity Interviews, 2020; Dixon, 2020; Cinema Today, 2020).

However, the outcome varied. Public reception was more in favor of the Japanese-produced TV series rather than the feature film, especially among the audience in Asia. The reception does not affect the analysis of both projects through the scope of the "network" of film repetitions: they both are integral parts of the *Ju-On* international franchise and actively adopt numerous elements from it and other J-horror films. Introducing the franchise to the TV medium provided additional resources and development opportunities.

Another prominent similarity is that they are hybrid by nature, combining elements of various film multiplicities. The variety of media and their development enabled the filmmakers to tell stories through various mediums and affected the nature of remaking. It is possible to trace elements of remakes, prequels and spin-offs in one title, which can be advantageous when utilizing various techniques to pay homage to multiple sources and adopt details from other media to appeal to their loyal audiences. On the other hand, such complexity and ambiguity of links and the nature of film multiplicities may be an issue, for example, when drawing contextually-based taxonomies.

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